When to Take Cuttings: Seasonal Timing Guide for Backyard Propagation

The difference between 80% success and 30% failure with propagation cuttings usually comes down to timing, not technique. Take cuttings from the same plant in June versus October and you'll see completely different rooting rates, even if you follow identical steps. Most small growers lose money on cuttings because they work against the plant's natural cycle instead of with it.

Here's when to take each type of cutting, what actually roots well in each window, and how to match your schedule and setup to the method that works.

Spring Through Early Summer: Softwood Window

Softwood cuttings (new growth that's still flexible) root fastest from late April through June in most climates. This is your best window for forsythia, hydrangea, weigela, and most deciduous shrubs. Take cuttings early morning when stems are fully hydrated. You want 4 to 6 inch tips that bend but don't snap. Strip lower leaves, dip in rooting hormone, and stick in a well-draining medium under shade or mist. Roots typically form in three to five weeks.

The catch: softwood cuttings need constant moisture and can't handle direct sun or drying out. If you're working without a mist system, cover flats with clear plastic domes and check daily. This method gives you the highest success rates but requires the most attention.

Late Summer: Semi-Hardwood Advantage

From mid-July through September, semi-hardwood cuttings (current season's growth that's started to firm up) become your best option. This works well for evergreens like boxwood, holly, juniper, and azalea, plus many broadleaf shrubs. These cuttings are tougher than softwood, so they tolerate less-than-perfect conditions and still root reliably.

Take 4 to 8 inch cuttings from healthy side shoots. The wood should resist bending but not be fully hard. Wound the base by scraping off a thin strip of bark on one side, apply hormone, and stick in coarse sand or perlite mix. Semi-hardwood cuttings root slower (six to twelve weeks) but need less babysitting. You can often get away with bottom heat and weekly watering instead of constant mist.

Fall and Winter: Hardwood for Patient Growers

Hardwood cuttings (fully mature wood from this year's growth) go in from November through February while plants are dormant. This is the lowest-maintenance method. Willows, dogwoods, currants, and many fruiting shrubs root easily this way. Cut 6 to 10 inch sections of pencil-thick wood, bundle them, and either stick directly in outdoor beds or store in moist sand until spring.

Roots develop slowly over winter and emerge when temperatures warm. Success rates vary more than other methods, but you can process hundreds of cuttings in an afternoon with almost no equipment. If you have limited space or no misting setup, hardwood cuttings let you build inventory without daily management.

If you want a complete system for turning cuttings into consistent side income, including propagation calendars, pricing guides, and customer-finding strategies that work at small scale, see how Backyard Nurserymen works. It walks you through the whole process from stick to sale.

Published by Backyard Nurserymen Reports, August 24, 2026